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ABSTRACT

CLASS IN BANTU AND ITS SYNTACTIC SIGNIFICANCE IS DISCUSSED WITH REFERENCE TO GENDER IN INDO-EUROPEAN AND SEMANTIC/SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF NOUNS. ON THE BASIS OF MODERN BANTU EVIDENCE AND THE COMPARATIVE METHOD, A MAXIMUM OF 21 CLASSES HAVE BEEN POSITED FOR PROTO-BANTU. THE STRIKING DIFFERENCE IN THE NUMBER OF CLASSES POSITED FOR PROTO-BANTU AND INDIVIDUAL BANTU LANGUAGES IS DUE TO THE COUNTING SYSTEM AND THE STATUS OF CERTAIN CLASSES. THE SEMANTIC CONTENT OF CLASS IN BANTU LANGUAGES HAS SYNTACTIC SIGNIFICANCE ONLY TO THE EXTENT THAT IT CORRESPONDS TO THE SEMANTIC/SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF THE NOUN, AND TO THAT EXTENT CLASS IS IRRELEVANT. THE SEMANTIC FEATURES ASCRIBED TO THE RESPECTIVE CLASSES IN PROTO-BANTU ARE BASED ON THE PREDOMINANCE OF SUCH FEATURES ACROSS BANTU LANGUAGES IN CORRESPONDING CLASSES. LISTED AND DISCUSSED ARE SELECTED CLASSES OF PROTO-BANTU AND THEIR SEMANTIC FEATURES ASCRIBED TO THEM IN CURRENT LINGUISTIC LITERATURE. (AUTHOR/AMM)

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THE SEMANTIC CONTENT OF CLASS IN BANTU AND ITS SYNTACTIC SIGNIFICANCE

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Class in Bantu and its syntactic significance is discussed in this paper with reference to gender in Indo-European and semantic/syntactic features of nouns.

Nouns in Bantu languages occur in classes which are, with certain exceptions, marked by prefixes corresponding to their singular and plural forms.

In Swahili, a Bantu language, words for 'person' mtu, 'child' mtoto, 'king' mfalme, 'wife' mke and others occur in one class and are phonetically marked by the prefix m- (<-- mu-) in the singular and wa- in the plural. Words for 'orange tree' mchungwa, 'bread' mkate, 'door' mlango, 'river' mto and others occur in another class and are phonetically marked by the prefix m- (<-- mu-) in the singular and mi- in the plural. Words for 'chair' kiti, 'potato' kiazi, 'shoe' kiatu, 'a blind person' kipofu and others occur in yet another class and are phonetically marked by the prefix ki- in the singular and vi- in the plural. Swahili nouns occur in a total of six classes. Nouns in Tshiluba, another Bantu language, occur in eight classes.[1] Nouns in Bantu languages occur in classes

AL 002 262

averaging seven or eight in number.

On the basis of modern Bantu evidence and the comparative method, a maximum of twenty-one classes have been posited for proto-Bantu. The striking difference in the number of classes posited for proto-Bantu and individual Bantu languages is due to the counting system and the status of certain classes. The singular and the plural of classes which have a singular/plural dichotomy have been classed separately. Derivational classes such as "abstracts", "diminutives", "augmentatives" and "infinitives" have also been given class status. Separate class status has also been given to "derived locative nouns". Location in Bantu languages is marked for "definite" location, "indefinite" location and "inside" location. The number six for Swahili and eight for Tshiluba excludes derivational classes and counts the singular and plural forms once.[2] To anticipate the conclusion of this paper, the justification for the above mentioned exclusions will be implicit in the hypothesis that the semantic content of class in Bantu languages has syntactic significance only to the extent that it corresponds to the semantic/syntactic features of the noun, and to that extent class is irrelevant.

The semantic features ascribed to the respective classes in proto-Bantu are based on the predominance of such features across Bantu languages in corresponding classes.

The following are selected classes of proto-Bantu and their

semantic features ascribed to them in current linguistic literature:[3]

Classes 1 and 2 (mu-/mo-/me- 'sg.', ba-/va- 'pl.') contain "autonomous individualized beings"; in other words "human" nouns.

Classes 3 and 4 (mu- 'sg.', mi-/me- 'pl.') contain "non-autonomous individualized beings; animistic concepts; parts of the body; plants; natural phenomena".

Class 5 (di-/de-/li-) conatins nouns which refer to "one of a pair of objects which come in pairs".

Class 6 (ma-) contains "mass" nouns indicating a "non-itemizable whole".

Classes 7 and 8 (ki-/ke- 'sg.', vi-/bi-/be- 'pl.') contain "inanimate objects".

Classes 9 and 10 (ni-/ny-/ne- 'sg.', li-ni-/ny-/di-ne- 'pl.') contain nouns "defined by their most characteristic feature".

Class 11 (du-/lu-/do-) contains nouns which refer to "individualized objects numbering more than two".

The semantic distribution of class posited for proto-Bantu is necessarily exclusive. It is, consequently, only partially reflective of the facts in any particular Bantu language. The Swahili noun class system for example is a case in point. It is generally recognized that with the exception of Class 1 (mu- 'sg.', wa- 'pl.' : *Bantu mu-, ba-) there is no correspondence between any one class and a semantic feature.

This recognition, however, varies from a complete disregard for the semantic content of the classes to a meticulous recording of all possible features without regard to relevance, syntactic or otherwise. The following, for example, are given by Ashton (1964) as "underlying ideas" of class 3 (ji-/Ø 'sg.', ma- 'pl.' : *Bantu li-, ma-):

> 1. ... names of things which occur in quantities, but which can be thought of singly as well, i.e.:
>
> (a) Parts of the body which go in pairs or in sets: jino, pl. meno tooth; sikio, pl. masikio ear.
>
> (b) Constituent parts of trees, bushes, etc.: jani, pl. majani leaf; tunda, pl. matunda fruit.
>
> (c) Phenomena which occur in quantities: jiwe, pl. mawe stone; yai, pl. mayai egg.
>
> (d) Nouns describing actions, etc., derived from verbs: neno, pl. maneno word kunena to speak; pigo, pl. mapigo blow kupiga to hit.
>
> 2. Miscellaneous words, some of foreign origin. shoka, pl. mashoka axe; shamba, pl. mashamba plantation; soko, pl. masoko market.[4]

There seems little justification for such a listing even for pedagogic purposes. Mkono (pl. mikono) 'hand'; mguu (pl. miguu) 'leg' are "things" which go in pairs "but which may be thought of singly as well". They are not, however, grouped with those of class 3. It is hard to see how stones and eggs

constitute things that occur only in quantities. If they do, then so must 'bananas' ndizi; 'coconuts' nazi and 'hair' nywele none of which are in class 3. And "miscellaneous words" is untenable as an "underlying idea".

Swahili class 1 (*Bantu classes 1 and 2) contains, with only two definite exceptions, "human" nouns. The exceptions are the words for 'insect, worm' mdudu (pl. wadudu) and 'animal' mnyama (pl. wanyama). There are, on the other hand, "human" nouns that occur in classes other than 1; specifically in classes 3 (*Bantu classes 5 and 6), 4 (*Bantu classes 7 and 8) and 5 (*Bantu classes 9 and 10). "Human" nouns in class 4 (ki- 'sg.', vi- 'pl.') with one exception refer to humans with physical defects.

kiziwi (pl. viziwi) 'a deaf person'

kipofu (pl. vipofu) 'a blind person'

kilema (pl. vilema) 'a deformed or disfigured person'

kiwete (pl. viwete) 'a cripple'

The one exception is kijana (pl. vijana) 'a youth'. Kijana as well as the preceding nouns are considered historical "diminutives" lexicalized in class 4 since the Swahili diminutive markers are also ki- in the singular and vi- in the plural.

"Human" nouns in class 3 (ji-/Ø 'sg.', ma- 'pl.') and 5 (ni-/Ø 'sg.', ni-/Ø 'pl.') are with one exception of foreign origin.

bwana (pl. mabwana) 'Mr., sir', class 3, PERSIAN

rafiki (pl. rafiki, marafiki) 'friend', class 5/3 ARABIC

dereva (pl. madereva) 'driver', class 3, ENGLISH

askofu (pl. askofu, maaskofu) 'bishop', class 5/3, ARABIC

Swahili class 2 (*Bantu classes 3 and 4) contains a variety of nouns without a predominant semantic feature. Nouns which refer to plants and trees, however, are either in this class or are formed by transferring to it nouns which refer to their fruits and flowers.

mwitu (pl. miitu) 'forest'

mche (pl. miche) 'shoot'

mchungwa (pl. michungwa) 'orange tree' (chungwa, pl. machungwa, 'orange' class 3)

mwembe (pl. miembe) 'mango tree' (embe, pl. maembe, 'mango' class 3)

mdimu (pl. midimu) 'lemon, lime tree' (ndimu, pl. ndimu, 'lemon, lime' class 5)

Swahili class 3 (*Bantu classes 5 and 6) contains in the singular corresponding to class 5 of proto-Bantu a few nouns which refer to one of a pair of objects which come in pairs.

jicho (pl. macho) 'eye'

goti (pl. magoti) 'knee'

Two prominent objects which normally come in pairs do not,

however, occur in class 3.

mkono (pl. mikono) 'hand, arm' class 2

mguu (pl. miguu) 'leg' class 2

Quite a few grouped in class 3 are "mass" nouns and do not occur in the singular.

mafuta 'oil'

maziwa 'milk'

maji 'water'

mate 'saliva'

madenda 'saliva which trickles from the mouth of some people in their sleep'

machozi 'tears'

A feature common to the above list is the fact that they are all natural liquids. Natural as opposed to synthetic such as soda 'a soft drink', chai 'tea' and kahawa 'coffee', all three of which occur in class 5. There are several natural liquids, however, which are not grouped in class 3.

damu 'blood' class 5

jasho 'sweat' class 5

mvua 'rain' class 5

The liquids are not the only evidence reflecting the historical status of class 3 as the class of "mass" nouns. Derived nouns referring to a "non-itemizable whole" are placed in this class.

maneno 'utterance' <-- ku-nena 'to speak, to say ...'

masomo 'lesson, studies' <-- ku-soma 'to read, to study ...'

maendeleo 'progress' <-- ku-endelea 'to continue'

malezi 'training' <-- ku-lea 'to rear, to educate'[5]

Class 3 contains a substantially greater number of nouns which are neither "mass" nor are they objects which come in pairs.

jiwe (pl. mawe) 'stone'

gari (pl. magari) 'car'

nanasi (pl. mananasi) 'pineapple'

Swahili class 4 (*Bantu classes 7 and 8) shows no positive common semantic denominator. Nouns in this class, with the exception of those mentioned earlier, are "inanimate" nouns. This is not, however, a feature exclusively typical of class 4. "Inanimate" nouns occur in all but class 1.

Swahili class 5 (*Bantu classes 9 and 10) and 6 (*Bantu class 11) like 4 display no common semantic denominator. An examination of the nouns in classes 5 (and 3), however, shows that the "human" nouns, with the exception of ndugu 'brother, close relative', are foreign loans.

baba 'father' ARABIC

mama 'mother' ARABIC

dada 'sister' ARABIC

jamaa 'relatives, extended family ...' ARABIC

adui 'enemy' ARABIC

askari 'soldier' ARABIC

binti 'girl, daughter' ARABIC

fundi 'craftsman' ARABIC

Nouns in class 5 which like the above examples do not carry the class prefix may optionally occur in class 3 in the plural.

rafiki 'friend' class 5	marafiki 'friends' class 3
askari 'soldier' class 5	maaskari 'soldiers' class 3
bar 'bar' class 5	mabar 'bars' class 3
saa 'hour' class 5	masaa 'hours' class 3

Transfer of class 5 nouns to class 3 has traditionally been viewed as a process of deriving "collective" nouns. The transfer for purposes of strict pluralization seems to be a more recent development. The last two examples above illustrate strict pluralization. The first two illustrate homonymous forms for strict pluralization and collectivity.

The following semantic features relevant to the various Swahili classes have been mentioned:

[HUMAN]

[ANIMATE]

[MASS]

[SENTIENT]

These are, with the possible exception of [SENTIENT], familiar features. They are readily seen to be syntactically relevant. The feature [SENTIENT] is also syntactically relevant. It is used here to refer to biological entities which

are neither human nor animal; plant life in general. It must be a sub-category of the feature [ANIMATE]. If not, we would not only exclude a [-animate] from the selectional features of the "verb" __ GROW in the sentence *'the chair grows', but also in the sentence 'the tree grows' which is perfectly acceptable. In other words, if we were not to accept the syntactic relevance of the feature [SENTIENT] we could not account for the sentence 'the tree grows' very economically.

"Animate" nouns in Swahili which occur in classes other than 1 do nevertheless govern concords corresponding to class 1.[6]

"Mass" nouns, with few exceptions, occur in class 3.

"Sentient" nouns always occur in class 2.

Where classes such as 1, 2 and 3 do display consistent but not necessarily exclusive semantic features, those same features are syntactically significant in spite of the class system.

This phenomenon is somewhat paralleled in the Indo-European gender system.

Nouns in French occur in two classes: masculine and feminine. All biologically masculine nouns occur in the masculine class.

père 'father'

frère 'brother'

oncle 'uncle'

All biologically feminine nouns occur in the feminine class.

mère 'mother'

soeur 'sister'

tante 'aunt'

There are nouns which are neutral in abstraction but occur in one of the two classes depending on whether their referents are masculine or feminine.

étudiant 'student' (masculine)

étudiante 'student' (feminine)

There are, finally, an overwhelming number of nouns in either class which occur in one or the other arbitrarily or for historical reasons, but certainly not because of inherent biological characteristics.

MASCULINE	FEMININE
crayon 'pencil'	maison 'house'
soleil 'sun'	lune 'moon'
photo 'picture'	chambre 'room'

Where the two classes display consistent but not necessarily exclusive semantic features of [MASCULINE] and [FEMININE], these same features are syntactically relevant in spite of a class system. That is to say the "complex symbol" N, or whatever is a [NOUN], must have somewhere in its hierarchy of features [±masculine] (or [±feminine]) if our grammar is to block or mark as relatively ungrammatical a sentence such as 'John is pregnant' for the same reason that it would neither block nor mark a sentence such as 'Jane is

pregnant'.

Class, to reiterate the conclusion, is syntactically significant to the extent that its semantic content is syntactically relevant. Class prefixes are syntactically irrelevant. The fact that [-sentient] nouns, that is to say [+animate (-sentient)] nouns, regardless of their class prefixes (be they ki- as in kipofu 'a blind person', ni- as in ndugu 'brother, close relative', or Ø as in askofu 'bishop') govern identical concords points to the priority of the features [±human] over morphological markers such as prefixes.

There remains a very large number of unrelated nouns in Swahili which group into classes that govern concordial prefixes, identical within the various groupings, and are themselves marked in most cases by prefixes. These are morphological affixes and as far as the noun classes are concerned do not add to our understanding of syntax.

Concordial relationships, on the other hand, have obvious syntactic functions. One immediate function of concord is "reference". Concordial affixes function as referential pronouns.

la in the answer oui je la connais 'yes I know her'
to the question est-ce que tu connais Marie?
'do you know Marie?'

le in the answer oui je le connais 'yes I know him'
to the question est-ce que tu connais Paul?

'do you know Paul?'

-wa- in the answer nawajua 'I know them' to the question unawajua watoto wangu? 'do you know my children?'

-vi- in the answer navipenda sana 'I like them very much' to the question unapenda viazi hivi? 'do you like these potatoes?'

REFERENCES

1. Virginia G. Pruitt and Winifred K. Vass, eds. A Textbook of the Tshiluba Language, by William M. Morrison, 2nd. ed. (Luebo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1965), p. 30.

2. A formal justification for incorporating the singular and plural forms, and for excluding "derivational" classes is not immediately relevant to the topic of this paper. Their inclusion would not, however, affect the concluding hypothesis. The term class is used to describe the Swahili (and other Bantu) noun groupings on the basis of either similar prefixes or the identity of concordial prefixes they govern. It is necessary, however, to distinguish these groupings from derivational and inflectional processes universal to the noun systems of Swahili and Bantu languages generally.

3. Edgar C. Polomé, Swahili Language Handbook (Washington, D.C., 1967), pp. 96-103.

Malcolm Guthrie, Comparative Bantu (Farnborough, England, 1967), I, pp. 36-40.

N.J. van Warmelo, Trans. Introduction to the Phonology of the Bantu Languages, by Carl Meinhof (Berlin, 1932), pp. 39-40.

4. E.O. Ashton, Swahili Grammar, 2nd. ed. (London, 1964), p. 65.

5. The -o and -zi endings are two nominalizing suffixes.

6. The exception is concord between "human" nouns in class 5 and possessive pronouns.